

'The Copy' and '(Pas) Mon pays' at Enough Room for Space

The installation 'The Copy', together with the film '(Pas) Mon Pays, Part I and II' are shown at Enough Room for Space. The exhibition will also present archival material in relation to the history of the colonial monument in Mechelen and the proposed new inscription.

As the title indicates, '(Pas) Mon Pays, Part I and II', is in two parts. The first deals with a colonial monument in Mechelen and Michels' efforts to decolonize this statue with a group of Belgian citizens with Congolese roots. The second shows the artist's visit to DR Congo and is based on her personal history as she was born and raised in Congo. The film is an attempt to let the past encounter the present and see further into the future of the postcolonial situation, in both DR Congo and Mechelen.

In Mechelen, the colonial monument by Lode Eyckermans in the Schuttersvest pays homage to thirty one "pioneers who died for the civilisation in Congo" as it is inscribed on the statue. One of them is Van Kerckhoven, who was a notoriously cruel commander during the reign of king Leopold II of Belgium. The statue is very intriguing, with two stylised Congolese heads, a male and a female, as a Janus image. It aestheticises what is problematically called the African race and thus could be seen as a tribute to it. However, this is in stark contrast to the inscription on the plinth, since the inscriptions only tells one side of the story, the Belgian one. Confronted with this, Michels asked the sculptor Raf Vergauwen to make a scaled-down copy of the monument. She collaborated with a group of Belgian citizens with Congolese roots living in Mechelen and the surrounding area on a proposal for a new inscription for this copy. Involved in this process were Lieven Miguel Kandolo; Anne Wetsi Mpoma; Georgine Dibua; Jessy Ohanu; Michel Witanga; Joël Ndombe; Nadia Nsayi; Rina Rabau; Stella Okemwa; Don Pandzou; Floribert Beloko; Michel Mongambo and Sarah Bekambo.

In June 2019, after several months of meetings and working sessions, the group introduced this new inscription to the mayor of Mechelen, with the proposition to also place this text near the original statue. This text discusses both sides of history and focuses on the word civilisation, as well as acknowledging the impact of Belgian rule on Congo. Although critical, this inscription expresses a positive view of the future, a society of equality and respect.

The copy and the process, as well as the meetings and the visit, are the subject of Part I of Michels' film. For Part II of the film, Michels went back to the campus of the University of Kinshasa (former Lovanium) for the first time since she left it at the age of nine. She visited the house where she grew up, the university buildings, her old school, the church, the swimming pool and the city of Kinshasa. Along with the filmmakers Paul Shemisi and Nisar Saleh from Kinshasa, she made a video report of her encounters with the family now living in her childhood home, professors and students of the departments of history and artificial intelligence, a slam poet, people in the street and so on. In the film, her personal history, in the form of old photos and memories, is confronted with the current reality. This offers her the opportunity to take a critical look at the university's origins and the historically grown problems of dealing with images (photo and film) in Congo.

The proposed new inscription for the monument:

THE COLONISATION OF CONGO
LED TO A SHOCK
IN THE HISTORY OF HUMANITY.
IN THE NAME OF CIVILISATION,
ATROCITIES WERE COMMITTED,
VILLAGES WERE BURNT DOWN,
KINGDOMS DISAPPEARED.

THE COLONISATION CUT CONGO APART FROM ITS HISTORY,
CONTRIBUTED TO THE PROSPERITY OF BELGIUM
AND WEAKENED CONGOLESE SOCIETY.

THE WORD CIVILISATION SIGNIFIES RESPECT,
EQUALITY AND DIALOGUE,
IN RELATION TO A COMMON FUTURE.

THIS NEW INSCRIPTION
RESTORES AND PAYS HOMAGE
TO THE MILLIONS OF VICTIMS AND HEROES
OF THE COLONIAL TIME,
THOSE WHO ARE KNOWN AND LESS KNOWN.

BAKOKO NA BISO:
NGAKAPI
BOALI
WOTO-A-MBENGA
LUSINGA IWA NG'OMBE
KASONGO NYEMBO
SIMON KIMBANGU
PAUL PANDA FARNANA
PATRICE LUMUMBA
JOSEPH MALULA
PAUL LOMAMI-TSHIBAMBA

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